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ABSTRACT

The purpose of curriculum scholarship is to increase understanding of cause and effect relationships pertaining to curriculum characteristics, development, and utilization. The increased understanding on which these various improvements in educational practice depend can be achieved through a combination of several scholarly approaches. Synergy is promoted by respecting and encouraging the contributions of a multiplicity of methodological stances and then coordinating the various contributions to the solution of the same significant problems. (Author/MLF)

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Curriculum Scholarship: Refining the Distinction Between Ideology and Theory [1/]

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The theme of this symposium, "Priorities in Curriculum Scholarship: Toward Separatism or Synergy," entails five key concepts: Priority, scholarship, synergy, separatism, and curriculum. A shared understanding of the meanings of these five terms among the several participants and between them and their audience is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for intelligent communication about the theme. Even with shared meanings, the discussion can be stupid, but without such common understanding, it is bound to be. It is my contention that the same point applies to curriculum scholarship.

Without reasonable agreement as to the meaning of certain key terms representing some fundamental concepts in the field, there cannot be effective communication among those who profess to be curriculum scholars and, hence, no progress in their scholarly enterprise. Indeed, without such agreement, there is not even a basis for determining whether any particular activity does or does not constitute curriculum scholarship or, for that matter, whether there is such a thing as curriculum scholarship.

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I am not asserting that there must be agreement on the propositions that are put forward involving those fundamental concepts. With further scholarship, certain propositions will prevail over their competitors, at least until they are themselves replaced by still others. I am not advocating orthodoxy; I am calling for discipline, in the sense of community of discourse. Community implies a certain irreducible degree of sharing of purposes, interests, conceptions, and values. The discipline of entomology would not be advanced by the inclusion of CIA agents and Volkswagen dealers on the basis of their claiming that they, too, deal with bugs.

That the community of curriculum scholars cannot now agree on the definitions of basic terms is unfortunate, but not fatal, for with determination and intelligence agreement can eventually be reached. What to me is intolerable and must be resisted, however, is the view that such conceptual and semantic agreement is unimportant or that, in its absence, stipulation is unnecessary. No researcher can hold such a view, and anyone who does is ipso facto not a researcher and hence must be rejected by the community of curriculum scholars.

Let me return to the five terms in our theme. Paradoxically, the two least familiar terms, synergy and separatism (both, interestingly enough, essentially theological concepts) are the least ambiguous. In juxtaposition, they suggest the distinction between cooperation and competition, between the whole as greater than the parts and the parts as greater than the whole, between unity and diversity. By joining the two terms with the conjunction, "or," the inference is encouraged that

synergy and separatism are mutually exclusive and, by exclusion of the middle, that no other alternatives exist. But are the two really incompatible? While I have argued for conceptual concurrence, might not methodological separatism actually have greater synergistic potential than any monolithic scholarly approach?

The answer to that question bears on another of the five concepts--scholarship. Because of the psychologists' domination of educational research, the term "scholarship" may be a fortunate one in the context of curriculum, since it tends to connote a wider variety of methods of inquiry than "research" does. Curriculum scholarship can, I believe, be rather simply defined as any scholarly investigation in which curriculum or the curriculum development process is either a dependent or an independent variable. Its purpose is to increase understanding of cause and effect relationships pertaining to curriculum characteristics, development, and utilization. Its justification is the conviction that such increased understanding can contribute to the improvement of curriculum development, thereby improving curriculum, and also to the improvement of curriculum utilization, primarily in instructional planning and evaluation. The value of these improvements rests on the assumption that they will ultimately result in better learning and development.

The increased understanding on which these various improvements in educational practice depend can be achieved through a combination of several scholarly approaches. These include the experimental and correlational approaches of the psychologists and the survey methods of the sociologists, but they also include the synoptic and analytical methods

the historians, philosophers, and specialists in comparative education. In respecting and encouraging the contributions of a multiplicity of methodological stances, we may indeed promote one form of "separatism," but in coordinating the various contributions to the solution of the same significant problems, we promote "synergy." If, however, disparate groups call themselves curriculum scholars, but reach no meeting of minds on what the significant problems are and have no shared language or conceptual framework with which to communicate with each other, there can be neither synergy nor a discipline.

This kind of unproductive and disruptive separatism seems particularly likely to stem from the failure, through ignorance or design, to maintain a distinction between theory and ideology. When ignorance is responsible, there is no great loss to the field (other than pollution of its literature), because those who do not know the difference between explanation and exhortation are not likely to contribute anything significant to our knowledge base anyhow. But those who deliberately confound theory and ideology are dangerous because they are usually brilliant. By promoting their personal social or political philosophies under the guise of scholarship, they not only abuse their professional positions, exploit their employers, and take unfair advantage of their students, but in addition inflict a double penalty on the field of curriculum itself. The field is deprived of the contributions their intellects might have made to its body of knowledge, and it is further harmed by being required to defend itself against ideological subversion and linguistic contamination.

To move away from this rather negative analysis and give the discussion a more constructive tone, I turn now to the fourth concept in the theme: priority. This term has a dual meaning. A problem can have priority over another either because it is logically antecedent or because it has precedence by virtue of being more fundamental or important to a field. George Posner (1976) has identified 19 paradigmatic questions addressed by studies that might be considered to be instances of curriculum research. Previously (1970/71), I had identified 17 research dimensions of curriculum and instruction, ten of which had either curriculum or curriculum development as an independent or dependent variable. Each of these dimensions involved the discovery and validation of decision criteria and procedural rules. A variety of research methods was advocated, and Posner's examples represent even greater variety. No scholarly approach has priority over others except in the context of specific problems. But certain problems may indeed have logical or consequential priority, and these priorities need to be identified, if synergy is to be attained along with methodological separatism.

As I indicated at the outset, my point in examining the concepts in the topic of this symposium was to draw an analogy between discussion and scholarship. The quality of both depends on concurrence on the meaning of key terms and consistency in their use. Ironically, it is the fifth term in the theme about the meaning of which there is the least agreement, and this term, curriculum, is the central one in both the topic and our field of inquiry. Exactly ten years ago, I published an article (1967) in which I proposed a definition, the implications of which I have explored for a decade and elaborated in book form under the title, Intentionality

in Education (1977). But, while many curriculum scholars have found this conceptualization useful, there is no more agreement today on the meaning of curriculum than before.

Bob Gowin (1972) has observed with respect to educational research that one must ask not only whether a particular piece of work is research but also whether it is educational. His observation applies with special force to curriculum research or scholarship. Our difficulty is not so much with determining what is research. We can distinguish efforts to increase understanding from efforts to promote particular ideologies; we can respect a variety of inquiry methods; we can recognize priorities among problems; we can even agree that curriculum research is any inquiry with curriculum or curriculum development as a dependent or independent variable. But if we cannot agree on what curriculum is, we really don't know what we are talking about when we discuss curriculum scholarship. Each of us has his own idea of what it is, of course, but such conceptual separatism does not lend itself to the synergy needed to advance our field.

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